Pilot Skill: To Fly or Not to Fly

Kenneth A. Thomas
Safety Program Manager (OPS)
Fairbanks FSDO

The busy 2005 flying season is upon us and I would like to take this opportunity to address some important issues involving aviation in the State of Alaska. As we all know, Alaska offers some of the greatest experiences aviators have, but along with those experiences comes the requirement for a higher level of awareness of our responsibility. This article is written specifically to address the accidents in Alaska and point out some areas, which will have a direct effect in reducing the chances of an accident happening to you.

The Medallion Foundation and the FAA Alaskan Region conducted a study of accidents involving privately owned aircraft, operated under FAR Part 91, and over a five-year period from 1999 to 2004. These accidents were sorted using the NTSB data available on the NTSB website and, it was decided, that this particular study would exclude floatplane accidents. There were 144 accidents in wheel-equipped airplanes, 77 of those accidents showed skill-based pilot error. Now, before your hackles get up and you feel that "pilot error" is the world's biggest mystery box, where all accidents go that don't have any other identifiable cause, let me say that none of these accidents were fatal and the cause was taken from the airman's statements. In this group of 77 accidents there are 3 distinct categories: First, the pilot landed long, short, left or right of the intended touchdown point. Second, the pilot did not adequately compensate for a crosswind. Third, the pilot lost directional control of the airplane after touchdown. (It should be noted here that a large portion of these accidents were at unimproved locations, the very reason we chose to live and fly in Alaska!)

Let's consider skill for a moment. Skill is one of those things that just doesn't fit in a box. It is something that accumulates over time yet diminishes rapidly if not used. We attain skill by receiving instruction, develop skill with practice, and test skill by either hiring a critical second set of eyes or on the hard Alaskan turf. A lot of the time we consider our skill to be sufficient based on the successful outcome of an event, but is that really good enough? How hard did you work to hit the spot of intended touchdown? Are you trembling? Is your respiration rate up? Are you sweating? Ok, so it's a gravel bar and somewhat rougher than the strip at home, if the above is true, however, you did not spend enough time preparing for this operation and are operating near the outside edge of your skill level. So often in aviation we have to, "take the test, before we learn the lesson." (Quote John and Martha King) It is easy to go out and depend on the skill level of days gone by only to find that those skills have diminished with disuse and the task at hand requires more than we can give. Back to the 77 accidents, the number of flight hours logged varied from several hundred to many thousands; none were considered "new" pilots.

So then, how do we fix the problem? I'll offer a couple suggestions to pray upon your imagination. Get in touch with a local Certified Flight Instructor; the benefits are immeasurable. It shouldn't be too hard to find a CFI who can meet your needs and special interests as an airman. The FAR's require a session with a CFI every two years, which could be adequate if the time is spent focused on something, not looked upon as a legal requirement to suffer through. Flying with an instructor will always be beneficial, if you take their critiques and suggestions with an open mind. In my experience they are a group of folks who are truly there to help you and as mentioned before their backgrounds are varied so someone will have what you need. Another option is to get in touch with an Aviation Safety Counselor who specializes in your area of concern. Contact your local Aviation Safety Program Manager, who will be able to put you in contact with these quality resources. Nothing, absolutely nothing, can take the place of practice. I'm not talking about bland traffic pattern work. I'm talking about focused, rigid, tight tolerance practice. If it is landings you are working on you need a clearly defined box in which to land. You need to land inside that box in various wind conditions on several different days and the box should be no bigger than the box you plan to land in when you go fishing or hunting. You need to get some of that huffing and puffing done at home so that you do not find yourself beyond your limits in the field.

Another area of concern is Controlled Flight Into Terrain (CFIT). Alaska weather is the very epitome of unforgiveness, yet we often accept the risk and proceed with barred teeth and a giant pucker, some wind up unforgiven. This is a small percentage of accidents in Alaska but nearly all are FATAL. These accidents are nearly always preventable and are caused by insufficient weather information on preflight, airmen proceeding into worsening weather conditions, and a lack of skill in emergency escapement from the weather. Careful preflight planning, avoidance of risky situations, smothering of "get-home-itis", and practice, practice, practice under the hood for unavoidable circumstances will save you life when the chips are down.

Accidents happen, and as long as there are humans in machines, this won't change, but here's a thought. Maybe the time has come for us to take an honest look at the privileges we exercise when we are participating in aviation. Let's face it; in the United States the pilot in command privileges are broad, so broad that it is often easier to be legal than prudent. We are on our own to determine the effect of "Human Factors" on any flight for which we assume responsibility. The Federal Aviation Regulations address careless and reckless operations in aircraft and as airmen we tend to think of this in legal terms i.e., three landings in 90 days, one mile visibility in class G airspace, don't taxi onto a runway without a clearance, and so forth. Wait a minute, shouldn't landing on a gravel bar that is 20 feet wide and 500 feet long be considered careless when last landing was 75 days ago on the ski strip at International? How about this, you plan a flight in marginal weather, you proceed into lowering conditions, you know this route, in

fact you know the secret way through the pass, but the last time you were under a hood was 23 months ago on your biennial flight review. Isn't that careless? No, when measured by the "letter of the law." Yes, when measured by "prudence says so." Every year I watch something that is just phenomenal. There is a certain Super Cub, on a certain ramp in Alaska that seems to be on a very predicable schedule. Right around the first of October the skis go on, the airplane seldom moves throughout the winter, then the snow melts. I watch for activity, it's mid-July and the wing covers are flapping in the wind and the skis are contacting the hot, soft asphalt. Thirty-inch Bushwheels appear on the axles about the first week of August and the plane disappears for a couple of weeks during sheep season. The question of proficiency arises every time I see this happen. I have done everything short of sending the dreaded certified letter to the owner to try to get acquainted. All I can say is that if care is not taken in the area of pilot skills then we better widen our limitations to blue skies and runways hundreds of feet wide and thousands of feet long or not fly at all until we are willing or able to properly take on our responsibilities.

In closing this article I think it important to salute those who have operated safely for many years in Alaska. There is no doubt in my mind that there are many of you who take this thing seriously and actually know your own specific limitations. It has been my pleasure to know and work with some of the best pilots on the face of the earth, right here in Alaska. It is also important to note that as pilots we should not be paranoid about what we do. There is risk involved here, but having a proper plan for our activities can mitigate that risk. What we should have as pilots is an honest answer to the question that is constantly before us, "Have I done everything possible to prepare my self for what I am doing right now?" If the answer is anything other than an emphatic yes, then we need to cancel the mission. Just think of the affect the article in the newspaper about the accident will have on you and your loved ones if you can't honestly give the appropriate answer. It is no longer popular to live through an airplane crash, let alone die in one. Gone are the days in Alaska when folks shrugged their shoulders and accepted aviation accidents as a fact of life. When you add up emotional trauma, search and rescue, aircraft rebuild, loss of life or limb, and other negative aspects, it builds a strong case for preparatory measures to be taken to enjoy flying in this wonderful place.

Thank you all for taking the time to read this article, have a safety and enjoyable season.